

Professor Alf Rehn, University of Southern Denmark

Bataille and the Poverty of Innovation Theory

Whilst it might be said that the theoretical contributions of Georges Bataille have been generally overlooked in the field(s) of management studies, nowhere is this lack more pronounced than in the field of innovation theory. This is a double quandary, as it could be argued that most of management studies builds from notions that are foundational for research into renewal, change, and innovation, and few theorists have been as astute and as clear-eyed when it comes to the actual functioning of this as the lecherous numismatist of the Bibliothèque Nationale. That said, contemporary theories of innovation rarely if ever even acknowledge Bataille, nor that he in his *oeuvre* presented a most profound theory of innovation, particularly in the magisterial *The Accursed Share*. In this paper, it will be argued that Bataille not only presented deep insights into innovation, but that his insights are yet to be fully realized in the field of study that purports to study the same.

Innovation theory is supposed to be the theory of how innovation comes into our world, and the impact that this might have on the same. For anyone who has a more general (economy) understanding of what this entails, this will be a story of tremendous losses, failures, and expenditure. That said, innovation theory is remarkably wedded to notions of efficiency and an absolute certainty of innovation paying off, even against all available data. In the innovation literature, there is scant attention paid to the numerous empirical facts or conceptual tools suggested by Bataille, such as the notion of expenditure, the primacy of sacrifice, or the tenets of a general economy. As a result, innovation theory is still wedded to a very limited idea regarding the economy, all whilst it is adamant that the core phenomenon it investigates can break with said limitation. We might thus in innovation research see one of the most stark and egregious forms in which management studies has chosen to overlook the contribution of Bataillean thought, and this paper will aim to rectify this specific ill.

The aim of this paper, then, is two-fold. It aims to utilize the approach, concepts, theories, and perspectives of Bataille to criticize contemporary innovation research, and then, as an extension of this, suggest a program by which theories of innovation could be enriched by adopting Bataille as one of the most productive thinkers of the very same. By way of this double move, the paper aims to enrich the emerging field of critical innovation studies with insights from both Bataille and his followers, aiming to show how innovation is something more than merely the handmaiden of capitalism, and rather a key element of the general economy.

To some, this kind of conceptual engagement might seem somewhat paradoxical. As innovation has been portrayed as a central component specifically of market capitalism, as well

as one particularly bolstered by late capitalism, a conceptual critique such as that suggested by Bataille and those following him could seem like a rather marginal engagement. The paper will vigorously challenge this, and point to how Bataille's theory of the general economy allows us to wholly rethink economic categories, and suggest creative and transformative re-interpretations of the same. By challenging the assumed logic of innovation, the paper aims to recast it as a far more dynamic and perverse energy than contemporary innovation research realizes, and utilize Bataille to highlight the transgressive potentialities inherent therein.

What this means is that the paper doesn't just suggest that Bataille can be a theorist that would enrich contemporary innovation research, but rather that an engagement with Bataille's thinking could be a critical challenge of the same. The paper will thus suggest that contemporary innovation research might be unequipped to deal with the critique inherent in Bataille's work, and that the very same might be a critical component of the still emergent field of critical innovation studies. Utilizing both cases that are well entrenched in innovation studies (which has had a curious tendency for repetition and mimesis) and cases that transgress the norms thereof, the paper will highlight the ways in which Bataille can be used not only to enhance the field of management studies conceptually, but also as a way to make more empirical insights – such as when studying innovation.